



FIRST-YEAR PROGRAMS: A PRACTICE BRIEF BASED ON BEAMS PROJECT OUTCOMES

ABOUT THE BEAMS PROJECT

During 2003–07, the Building Engagement and Attainment for Minority Students (BEAMS) project fostered data-based campus change initiatives at more than 100 four-year Historically Black, Hispanic-Serving, and Tribal colleges and universities to increase student engagement and learning. Each campus made a commitment to analyze the scope and character of its students' engagement by participating in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and to implement well-designed action plans intended to improve student engagement, learning, persistence, and success. The Summer Academy—an annual gathering of representatives from various colleges and universities for collaborative work aimed at increasing access and success in higher education—provided dedicated time for BEAMS teams to identify solutions that could influence institutional and national higher education policy and practices. BEAMS is a partnership between NSSE and the Alliance for Equity in Higher Education, which is managed by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, and is supported by Lumina Foundation for Education.

This practice brief is one of a series highlighting key practices undertaken by some of the many successful BEAMS schools during the project's five years of data collection and action plan implementation. These practice briefs accompany a monograph that details the process BEAMS institutions used to craft data-driven action plans and to implement those plans to improve student success. The purpose of the practice brief series is to outline effective practices that can be replicated in postsecondary institutions interested in pursuing data-based change and increasing student engagement, learning, and success. This particular brief highlights the first-year student initiatives undertaken at four institutions. The focus on project implementation and accomplishments demonstrates how these projects might be replicated and how emphasis on the first-year experience can ultimately result in increases in student engagement and success.

INTRODUCTION

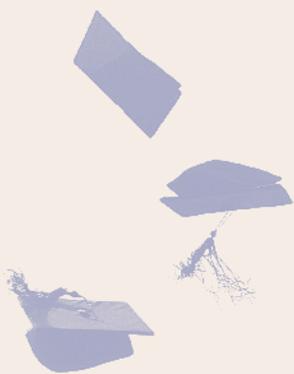
Attention to enhancing academic achievement and persistence for undergraduate students has often focused on first-year programs. Because both theory and research have emphasized the importance of successful transitions to university study, the first year has become the focal point for faculty, administrators, staff, and other students as a way to enhance student success and build on college access efforts.

Successful first-year programs seamlessly weave together a number of support strategies important for successful integration into campus learning and living, particularly those that bridge the gap between in-class and out-of-class activities. Programs and services often appearing as part of comprehensive first-year programs include the following:

- Structures for supporting entering students such as orientation and summer bridge programs
- Academic support programs such as advising and mentoring
- Structural changes to course offerings such as first-year seminars and learning communities
- Service-learning and other co-curricular programs

These efforts are designed to help students make the transition required to be successful in college and to engage students fully in the learning process. Other important issues that must be considered when crafting successful first-year programs include work with pre-college students and their parents, student finances and financial aid, early warning systems, mandatory attendance policies, and administrative withdrawal options.

The BEAMS campuses highlighted in this brief have focused on different combinations of support programs in building their first-year initiatives. At the heart of each initiative is a comprehensive first-year experience program designed to meet the unique needs of that institution's entering students.



INSTITUTIONAL EXAMPLES

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY—NORTHRIDGE

California State University—Northridge (CSUN), located north of Los Angeles, is a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and among the largest of the Cal State campuses. CSUN serves a majority of low-income, first-generation, commuter students, who often require developmental course work. Faculty, staff, and administrators have used BEAMS as the context, grounded in NSSE and other data, for centering their work on student success.

The CSUN BEAMS team focused their first-year work on the development of learning communities and on active and collaborative learning in the classroom, coupled with a strong program in which students support each other in their learning. Most of the initiatives listed above have been incorporated by CSUN in its programming, and the team has paid special attention to ways to connect commuter students with campus activities.

The CSUN BEAMS team used a previously developed campus list on student-learning outcomes to map their interventions and design measures to assess their progress in a comprehensive fashion. The list included the following:

- Awareness—prospective students will understand the process of becoming CSUN students
- Belonging—new students will become familiar with campus resources to enhance their learning and university life and will know how to transact basic university business
- Confidence—students will recognize the need to balance university commitments and their personal lives
- Direction—students will take an active role in considering a major and seeking out relevant information

The CSUN BEAMS team has had strong continuity of membership, and the team consistently meets to monitor progress and move forward. This commitment has been important in the success of the learning communities, which are currently being expanded. The team is now launching a campus-wide conversation on peer-mentoring best practices. The campus expects continuing increases in NSSE scores, reflecting the role student mentors play in engaging new students on campus and with their learning.

JARVIS CHRISTIAN COLLEGE

Jarvis Christian College (JCC), a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) located in Hawkins, Texas, used BEAMS in concert with other efforts on campus to enhance its work with first-year students. With many low-income, first-generation, and under-prepared students, Jarvis has experienced difficulties with retention and graduation rates that have focused campus attention on finding means to attract and retain students to graduation.

The members of the JCC BEAMS team were charged with developing, implementing, and assessing a variety of strategies to improve campus efforts. These members have been creative in helping urban students become connected with a rural campus and have adopted a campus-wide theme for their efforts: “It takes the entire college to graduate a student.” As an example, the JCC BEAMS team developed an induction ceremony for new students. This new ritual provides a significant welcoming experience for students, because it highlights both what it will take to be successful in college and the college’s commitment to supporting students through graduation. JCC has implemented an electronic portfolio, a mentoring program, a freshman celebration day, service-learning projects that affect campus life, and other programs to help students make the transition to successful study.

Entering students at JCC participate in a first-year experience seminar that meets twice a week—a classroom session with sections of no more than 15 students that includes pedagogical engagement to foster student learning and a second session offered as an assembly for all on campus. Faculty members receive pre-service training and network together on strategies for supporting the students. The iteration of the first-year seminar at JCC is a model appropriate to a religious-based campus and has become part of the fabric of campus life.

In their review of NSSE data and in their reflective review on campus life, the JCC BEAMS team identified a gap in student understanding of the campus mission and in how students and others experienced the campus. The team’s wide-ranging efforts resulted not only in curricular and co-curricular innovations but also in customer-service training for all campus personnel. All phones on campus are now answered with a phrase that describes the campus: “Jarvis Christian College—where dreams come true.”

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS—PAN AMERICAN

The University of Texas—Pan American (UTPA), an HSI located in Edinburg, Texas, also emphasized work with entering students. The campus strategic plan linked with BEAMS and with a Title V–funded project to strengthen its first-year experience efforts. The central BEAMS project for the campus is a new three-hour “Learning Framework” course, which is a graduation requirement for all students and must be taken within the first 30 hours of study on campus.

The Learning Framework course stresses theories and applications of learning, cognition, and motivation. At the inception of the course, volunteer faculty taught the course, assisted by university staff. Within a year, full-time faculty were hired to teach approximately 45 sections of the course every semester. The Nelson-Denny and other instruments have been used to assess outcomes for students in the course. Analyses have also included both demographic and student success measures. The research confirms that passing this new course is strongly associated with success on campus, including a positive relationship with students’ first-semester grade point averages.

UTPA recently completed its Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) review with the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) focused on efforts to enhance student success in mathematics. Pilot efforts are underway and expansion is slated for the coming academic years. Such attention to the entire curriculum for entering students, grounded in data and ongoing institutional improvement and planning, was reflected in the BEAMS project.

UNIVERSITY OF THE INCARNATE WORD

The University of the Incarnate Word (UIW), an HSI located in San Antonio, Texas, has grown from a women’s college to a dynamic urban co-ed campus with significant and expanding graduate and professional programs. The UIW BEAMS team worked with campus leadership and faculty governance to develop strategies appropriate to the UIW context for supporting students in their first year. Team efforts—focused on orientation, the first-year curriculum, and advising—began with the articulation of expected student-learning outcomes and ended with planned program improvements coming out of assessments. A Title V grant has provided the resources for program implementation, and integration of the BEAMS project with SACS accreditation QEP provided the necessity for campus change.

The goals of the first-year program at UIW are as follows:

- Students understand the culture of higher education
- Students utilize university services
- Students make informed and more realistic choices about majors
- Students understand the importance of the curriculum
- Students know the UIW mission
- Students bond with the UIW community
- Students engage in co-curricular activities

These goals have resulted in a wide range of programs. For example, orientation is now mandatory. UIW is changing to a new model of advising. Faculty teams have embedded learning outcomes in courses for entering students. UIW also launched significant programming that wraps around the curriculum.

A succession of task forces and committees, along with strong leadership and participation from the vice president for academic and student affairs has provided ongoing continuity for the work. Participation from students in BEAMS has affirmed their role and has resulted in a stronger project, informed by student perspectives, and in student self-affirmation. Building on the QEP, BEAMS, and Title V projects, along with the continued support from campus constituencies, UIW is now launching a student success department to institutionalize the components of its BEAMS work. The department will also provide leadership by faculty and staff who are knowledgeable about and committed to the success of entering students.

COMMON CONCEPTS

The BEAMS project has provided these campuses with the context to enhance their work with entering students in significant ways. Prominent among the factors for a successful first-year experience program are the following:

- **Pursue assessment and accountability.** The use of NSSE and other data has provided the campuses with important measures of student engagement. Initial data from NSSE can be contextualized and reviewed in relationship to other similar campuses. Campuses have begun to see increased engagement of their students after attending to first-year programming in systematic ways.
- **Support a community of practice.** The BEAMS project develops an understanding and explores the assumptions and practices of others doing the same work. For many faculty and administrators from across campus, the work is new. The National Center for the Study of Students in Transition and the Policy Center for the First Year have been among the national groups to form communities of practice for those individuals working with entering students.
- **Share lessons learned.** The BEAMS project has provided opportunities for faculty, administrators, and staff in these communities of practice to share their data and results. Gaps remain, however, between practitioners doing the work and those conducting research in higher education. Those who do research on a campus could do well to form partnerships with those who serve students “in the trenches” to find ways to enhance student academic achievement and persistence.

- **Embrace continuity as a context for change.** Two factors associated with institutional progress on these campuses are continuity of leadership and continuity of the staff doing the work with entering students through structures. Stability of leadership ensures that the campus continues to move forward and provides the opportunity for attention to long-standing issues, such as entering students.

CONCLUSION

The BEAMS project allows institutions to focus on strengthening programming for first-year students. When an institution has strong support programs to help entering students increase their academic achievement and persistence, it benefits the entire campus. The four schools discussed in this brief had dedicated BEAMS teams that were able to take specific actions to develop and improve on innovative strategies to enhance their first-year programming. The teams were intentional in embedding their work in long-term campus efforts, enhancing its sustainability. They also established structures to ensure the continuing evolution of programs as the campus identified new contexts or programs that enhance student success.

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PGPB05200803-2KBM

